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ABSTRACT

A review of the literature reveals some of the issues English teachers face when dealing with nontraditional students. An overview of the needs and instructional preferences of such students grew out of a larger project being conducted on the subject at Seattle University, which showed that adults seem to prefer (1) a problem solving focus, (2) practical learning experiences, (3) learning that is incorporated into existing experience, (4) an individual approach to instruction, (5) teaching approaches other than lecture, (6) grades that are based on more than tests, (7) a variety of ways to meet course requirements, and (8) instructors who are interested in their progress, who are relaxed and informal in class, and who have a realistic view of their students' outside duties. Other studies show that successful literature programs for adult learners feature innovative scheduling and packaging, variety in methods of instruction, and a high degree of individualization. This may involve materials modified for particular students, selection of materials relevant to the students' own lives, or adoptation of existing materials. Many of the general principles used with literature classes seem equally effective for writing courses. Nontraditional students seek practical writing competencies. They are more interested in technical writing, including resume writing, writing compositions, writing reserch papers, and research design and proposals, and are more likely to enroll in shorter courses that stress essential writing skills. Some problems these students have in writing are lack of advance planning, organization, and sense of purpose in organization. (CRH)

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Teaching College English to Nontraditional Students: A Survey of Research

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Teaching College English to Nontraditional Students: A Survey of Research

One of the most useful general guides to the teaching of adults is Jerrold Apps' practical book The Adult Learner on Campus (1981). In it, Apps recounts the story of a lion who decided to conduct a research study in the jungle to confirm that he was indeed king of the beasts. He met a number of animals as he conducted his survey, asking each one "Who is the king of the jungle?" Wishing to escape alive, each one answered, "You are, master." Finally he encountered a huge elephant and asked his question again. No answer. He repeated the question. Still there was no reply. Finally, he asked again, this time in his loudest roar. By now, the elephant had had enough; he reached down, picked up the lion, thumped him against a tree several times, and tossed the lion aside. The lion dragged himself off into the jungle to what he thought was a safe distance. Then he turned back to the elephant and said, "You didn't have to get so angry just because you didn't know the right answer."

Apps' point is that, in teaching adults, an instructor needs to adapt many of the techniques common in teaching traditional students; instead of raising barriers to make sure only the fittest survive, for example, professors must learn to be supportive of their nontraditional students.

A useful overview of the needs and instructional preferences of nontraditional students grew out of a larger project being conducted on the subject of nontraditional students at Seattle University (Hughes, 1983). These adult students, Hughes found, prefer:

1. a problem-solving focus
2. practical learning experiences
3. learning that is incorporated into an existing framework of learning and experience
4. an individual approach to instruction
5. a teaching approach other than lecture
6. that grades not only be based on tests
7. that more than one way to meet course requirements be provided
8. instructors who are interested in their progress, who are relaxed and informal in the class, who use many examples, and have a realistic view of students' outside duties.

These qualities, in some form, appear in almost every effective literature and writing program developed for nontraditional students.

Successful literature programs for adult learners feature innovative scheduling and packaging, variety in methods of instruction, and a high degree of individualization. That individualization may involve materials modified for particular students, selection of materials relevant to the students' own lives, or adaptation of existing materials.

Bland's (1950) comments are interesting as an early affirmation of the value of study of literature by adults. Lamdin (1979) agrees, and points out that adults, especially those over 45, can become interested in the humanities if teachers rethink their approaches. Literature teachers in particular should adopt a thematic rather than an aesthetic approach.

Dudley (1975) explains how flexibility became important in a "survey of tragedy through the ages" she taught. Koch (1980), on the other hand,

became involved in revision of an entire program in response to student problems with an interdisciplinary course in "Conflict and Change," for which course content was revised to involve student experience.

Manol (1981) agrees on the tendency of nontraditional students to seek a relationship between the literature they encounter and their "experiences as adults." The lives of her students were marked by rapid change and transition, and they seemed to use fiction reading as a way of handling the experiences of these transitions.

Gebharat (1974) presents some strategies for presenting literature to less sophisticated students in a mostly theoretical study. He goes on to suggest various accomodations for these students. Another way to meet the educational needs of nontraditional students is illustrated by the Adult College Opportunity Program at California State College, San Bernardino (MacPike, 1981), which combines carefully scheduled courses in "writing and thinking skills" with "a seminar series on adult development patterns and learning styles" and peer group meetings (voluntary, intended as support sessions, and scheduled during non-seminar days).

Trivisonno (1982) describes an int grated 3-course humanities program at Ursuline College (Cleveland, OH) combining humanities and writing which was developed specifically for adult students. She provides detailed discussion of one course in the program ("Focus on Life," a 6-credit interdisciplinary humanities course), which included: extensive writing of drafts (accompanied by in-class editing); discussion of assigned readings; instruction on principles of organizing and writing; and weekly tutorial sessions in the writing lab for those students with basic usage problems.

A course in "Fiction and American Society" at York College of

Pennsylvania (Siegel, 1980) combined group and individual work in a seminar offered to nontraditional students. Students and instructor selected the materials of the course together, each student selecting a group of novels which were then discussed in a series of individually-prepared papers. Students met individually once weekly with the instructor for conferences on the papers; in addition, the entire group met once weekly for an informal seminar meeting (accompanied by wine and a covered dish supper).

In an article of value to the novice teacher of adults, Schilt (1980) describes how, despite problems and obstacles, teaching adults can provide a renewal experience for the jaded English teacher.

Older adults compose a specialized market, although many of the techniques useful with nontraditional students in general work well. Several studies concentrate on this group (Gold, 1982; Staples, 1981; K. Lewis, 1979).

Valuable for adults involved with independent study and individualized reading lists are two representative sources that have been around for some time, those developed by John Lewis (1976) and Lueders (1967), which can also help students who are preparing (either alone or with help) to take CLEP examinations.

Many of the general principles used with literature classes seem equally effective for writing courses, of course. Nontraditional students seek practical writing competencies. In a survey of 1000 nontraditional students at Governors State University (IL), high on a list of desired skills was an area described as "technical writing," which included "resume writing, writing compositions, writing research papers, and research design and proposals," while interest in such usage

skills as grammar, spelling, sentence structure, and punctuation was markedly lower (Suddick and Owens, 1982).

Brand's (1982) experiences in trying to establish adult education and continuing education writing programs at the University of Missouri-St. Louis similarly led her to conclude that adults in the business world and greater community want (and will pay for and enroll in) courses in essential writing skills--practical courses that take only 3-5 weeks.

Testing can prove useful in placing nontraditional students into writing programs and in assessing actual needs rather than using only student desires as a basis for that placement. Both the Test of Standard Written English of the SAT (Suddick, 1982; Suddick, 1981) and the ACT English test score (Battle, 1980) have been found accurate in predicting both performance in the basic composition course and overall academic success.

Several studies have investigated the attitudes of nontraditional students toward writing and writing courses. In several surveys of adult writers, Aldrich (1982; 1979) found that the subjects' writing tended to be ineffective despite general technical competence in grammar and mechanics. Their main problems, Aldrich discovered, were lack of advance planning, organization, and sense of purpose and organization--problems that in turn arose from not realizing the importance of the preparation stage or from not knowing how to prepare. In contrast, a survey of general anxiety and writing anxiety among students at Northern Virginia Community College (Thompson, 1981) showed lower overall general and writing anxiety levels among nontraditional students.

Connors (1982; 1980) reports on key differences between traditional and nontraditional students' behavior in writing courses at Edgecliff

College of Xavier University (Cincinnati, OH). She found that nontraditional students felt less confident about having something worth writing about in their own experiences, were more likely to perceive themselves as working hard in their courses, wanted (even more than traditional students) direction rather than complete freedom in writing assignments, and spent more time on preparation for each class session (2.9 hours compared to 1.9 hours for traditional students).

Experiences with nontraditional students at Queensborough Community College (C.U.N.Y.) led Troyka (1982) to note four "legacies" of these students that suggest ways of teaching developmental composition to them.

1. "Non-traditional students are highly gregarious and social." To capitalize on this trait, instructors should build on social situations; for example, interview activities during the first class can lead to written reports on the interviews or to other written assignments.
2. "Non-traditional students are more comfortable in an oral rather than a written mode." Teachers need to move these students from generalized to more focussed communication through such activities as simulation games or reading aloud to the class.
3. "Non-traditional students are holistic thinkers." Hence, instructors should try to present "overall contexts" before going on to small grammatical points. For example, presenting samples of good student writing from former offerings of the course provides a useful overview; to help with grammar, using actual

examples and samples is better than providing abstract rules.

4. "Non-traditional students are ambivalent about learning." In working with these students, an awareness that succeeding in school may move them away from family and peer group is important.

Couch (1978) agrees that certain philosophical assumptions must underlie what happens in the composition classroom, including: acceptance of the students as they are; appreciation of their cultural heritage while "attempting to equip them with . . . Standard English . . . ."; a positive approach to the students and their work; an "attempt to give them guided practice in writing prose"; and recognition that "changes in language can bring about changes in life." Day (1980) supports Troyka's notion of the importance of providing an overview to the student, recommending that the course syllabus be designed to serve as an "advance organizer" for the mature student. In addition, she recommends planning the course around a hierarchy of skills proposed by R. M. Gagne in The Conditions of Learning (3rd ed., New York: Holt, 1977), and presents course applications of these eight concepts. Slaninka (1983), a member of the nursing department at West Chester State University (PA), also agrees that adult writers differ from younger students by having better attitudes toward writing, spending substantial amounts of their time in writing, and seeing revision as a significant and integral part of the writing process. She claims free writing, career-oriented assignments, and peer review are particularly useful kinds of writng assignments.

Silver (1982) describes a restructuring of the entire composition curriculum at Delaware Technical and Community College (Wilmington, DE),

where most of the students were nontraditional and had reacted poorly to traditional composition courses. When the college discovered that its "nontraditional students needed and wanted to learn functional or applied forms before they tackled more literary writing forms, it decided on a business communication approach in all composition classes, using "job-related and interdisciplinary materials. . . ."

Other writing course modifications that have been tried with nontraditional students include work with sentence combining (Mulder, 1978), use of individualized instructional materials as an alternative to traditional classroom instruction (Moton, 1977), and attempts to overcome the psychological reluctance of adult students to risk the self-disclosure involved in writing (Hymovitz,1977). Hiatt (1973) describes a Baruch College (C.U.N.Y.) writing workshop for paraprofessionals (many of whom spoke nonstandard dialects) that involved considerable in-class writing, mandatory out-of-class conferences, a simplified linguistic approach to grammar, "recognition of variant language structures," and an informal classroom atmosphere. Kalister (1981) discusses a writing center program for nontraditional students. Among Kalister's findings were the importance of maintaining student files, of being objective and diplomatic in marking papers, of previewing audiovisual materials (to avoid those which might be insulting to students), and of maintaining a low student-teacher ratio.

Finally, Taylor (1980) describes teaching the writing of poetry to "adults who have shown no previous inclination to write poetry" She recommends beginning by overcoming any negative preconceptions and misgivings the group may have about poetry. Next, she teaches two "basics" of writing poetry: she tells students to stick to the simple

words of the language, and she teaches them rhythm by observing their own speech. (In one drill, students repeat sentences to themselves or to a partner and then write these sentences down in a split form that puts the emphasized word at the end of the line.) Then, groups go on to creativity exercises, such as use of "active imagination" techniques--for groups familiar with them--or free association.

These, then, are a few of the ways in which English teachers are meeting the challenge of an increasing number of nontraditional students in their literature and writing classes. But the amount of research done so far is limited, and, like the elephant in Apps' story, we may find coming up with the right answers a difficult and frustrating task. One obvious solution is increased sharing of information about our teaching experiences with nontraditional students.

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